Identically Different

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Identically Different

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Summary

AU where Hannibal is an FBI profiler troubled by his own potential for violence and Will is a psychiatrist and serial killer.

When Hannibal doesn't answer, Will says, "This must be an awful shock to you."

His voice is slurred. At first, Hannibal had attributed it to large gash he'd left in Will's left cheek, but he realizes now that Will is tremendously drunk.

"No," Hannibal says, slowly, as the pieces begin to slide into place for him. "In retrospect, it's not that surprising at all."

Chapter 1

The office is warm and homey, in an understated kind of way. There's a golden hue to the lighting that reminds Hannibal of the soothing heat from a lit fireplace. The drapes are a soft shade of red shot through with gold thread, adding to the effect.

A therapeutic atmosphere, he supposes.

The doctor is warm too, his smile soft as Hannibal extends his hand, though his grasp is surprisingly strong. Hannibal finds himself liking him almost at once, and then feels suspicious of both the doctor and himself because of that liking.

"Dr. Graham," Hannibal says.

"Pleased to meet you," he says. "May I call you Hannibal?"

Hannibal supposes that it's irrational, the way the question rankles him in its causal insistence on informality. "All right," he says, and does not ask if he may call Dr. Graham by his first name.

Predictably, Will insists that Hannibal do so anyway.

Hannibal is uncomfortable in the plush chair. He sits stiffly, his spine pressed ramrod straight against the back of the chair to put as much distance between himself and Will. Will leans back as well, mirroring Hannibal's essential pose, but makes his own body more relaxed.

Hannibal is speaking. "After what happened last month, I was sent to Dr. Bloom. She decided to refer me to you."

"You mean after your deadly force encounter with Eldon Stammets."

"After I killed him, yes." The words are spoken matter-of-factly, but Will senses something of a challenge to them. Hannibal is waiting to see how he will respond. Moving on instinct, he sets his own face to look troubled by the admission but not repulsed.

"What reason did she give you for this referral?"

"She believes that I have an exaggerated sense of my own dangerousness. The fact that she is, technically, a forensic psychologist was, she thinks, only reinforcing the idea."

"Dr. Bloom told you that?"

"Not in so many words. She was kinder about it."

"Was she right?"

“This is my second ‘deadly force encounter.’ Once is bad luck. Twice is a pattern.”

Will, who had been contemplating suggesting something just along that line to see how Hannibal would take it, is caught off balance. He masters his face quickly, but worries that some sign of astonished delight may have shone through.

Hannibal is remarkably difficult to read, but Will thinks he glimpses distrust in the slight narrowing of the eyes.

“Usually, when an agent kills someone in the course of duty the concern is helping them through the stress, fear and guilt that follows to prevent them if possible, from developing PTSD. But that isn’t my area of focus.”

“I’m aware,” Hannibal says, and perhaps there is an edge of annoyance to his voice. Will makes mental note of it - in case he needs an easy way to get under Hannibal’s skin, acting as though he assumes Hannibal doesn’t know something is likely to do the trick. “Your specialization is in C-PTSD, in particular cases stemming from childhood trauma. The distinction is that, whereas the first deals with trauma inflicted by fairly short-term events, such as a tour of active combat duty or a ‘deadly force encounter,’ the latter deals more with the *complex* damage associated with extended exposure to a traumatizing environment. Hence the ‘c.’

“That about sums it up, thank you.” Will leans forward. “Do you consider yourself to be traumatized?”

The ghost of an expression. Gallows humor in the twitch of the edge of his mouth. “In light of what I've already told you, if I said 'yes' would that make things better or worse?”

“Everything about Stammets’ project felt like a personal accusation,” Hannibal says, the next time they meet.

There is - maybe - a shade of reluctance in the way Will puts down the file that Hannibal had given him. The file wasn’t supposed to leave the records room, but Hannibal had slipped it casually into his bag and walked out, free of any twinge of guilt but as always vaguely worried by that lack.

Hannibal didn't miss the way that Will paused at the photos. He knew exactly how long one could look at such pictures while among company before it became socially unacceptable. Will went over that line, by just a hair. Hannibal wonders if he did so deliberately.

“How so?”

“I fall short of his vision for how people ought to be.”

“Most people do.” Will’s eyes are very expressive. He is watching Hannibal intently now, but Hannibal thinks part of him still lingers with the photos.

“I’d appreciate it if you could avoid polite equivocations,” Hannibal tells him. Will lifts his chin, nearly imperceivable - acquiescence without any admission of fault. Hannibal has not decided yet if he likes the doctor - or, at rather, if his desire to like him is safe - but he’s grateful for the tact.

Hannibal circles back to the problem. “Stammets offered me a solution. He said that he understood my problem, and that he wanted to help me.”

“I’ve just read about that solution. Rotting alive in the ground next to a row of lonesome corpses, food for fungus.” Will’s voice is gentle but his eyes are intent. “What about that appealed to you, Hannibal?”

“Connection.”

He waits, but Will says nothing. He watches Hannibal, head cocked slightly to the side. In the silence, a confession blooms.

“When he came at me with the needle, I thought for an instant of letting him use it on me.” It comes harder than anything else Hannibal has said so far, admitting that. “I wanted to see.”

“But you shot him instead. Your sense of self-preservation is strong.”

It feels like an insult, Will’s words. Or an attack. Hannibal turns his head away.

“I don’t think that I should have shot him.”

“The bureau will find no wrongdoing on your part, Hannibal. You were within regulations. That doesn’t reassure you?”

Hannibal feels his upper lip twitch towards a disgusted snarl. He controls it. He does not answer, however, and this time it is Will who breaks first.

“He intended to kill you, didn’t he?”

“I could have gotten the needle from him.” He worries for an instant that this sounds like a foolish boast or silly wishful thinking, but he glances towards Will and sees that the doctor believes him. “I didn’t need to kill him.”

“Well, then,” Will asks, “why did you?”

And Hannibal says, “Because I wanted to.”

Chapter 2

Chapter by Pragnificent (PragmaticHominid)

Will does not share Hannibal's desire to be seen and understood.

He often feels dangerously exposed, the truth of himself always threatening to bubble to the surface. But as his sessions with Hannibal progress, he finds himself offering small glimpses of himself in exchange for a clearer picture of Hannibal.

It's a difficult balancing act - a subtle allusion to violent thoughts or feelings on his own part puts Hannibal at ease and encourages him to open up further, but Will knows that if he goes even a hair too far Hannibal's suspicions will shoot all the way into the red zone. Hannibal allows himself no pleasure in his own darkness and, it is clear to Will, will not tolerate the pleasure Will finds in his own personal wickedness and Hannibal's potentiality for the same.

Not yet, anyway.

Will enjoys the challenge. There's a great pleasure in wrapping himself around a mind like Hannibal's, feeling out all the shadowy contours and brilliant curvatures and working out how they fit against his own.

Hannibal is breathtakingly honest about many things, and Will feelings in him the weight of a life-long craving for confession, if not absolution, but there are parts of him that must be teased out gently. Will does not mind the work. He knows that he is good at it.

"You're good with the crime scenes," Will tells Hannibal now. "One of the best, if the press is to be credited."

There are, Will knows, multiple sore points for Hannibal embedded in that statement, and he is curious which one Hannibal will respond to first.

"Have you been on tattle-crime dot com, doctor?" Hannibal asks. "'Hannibal Lecter, the Bureau's star profiler, catches serial killers because he's wired like one.' History of violent encounters with suspects, troubled past. All of that?"

Will spreads his hands, admitting to the indiscretion.

He has considered, idly, killing the Lounds woman for Hannibal's sake, but that's a risky business - suspicion might fall on Hannibal, and Will wouldn't like for that to happen. Hannibal's hostility for the woman is common knowledge - they have clashed publicly, and she has not shied from publishing her own embellished accounts of the arguments.

Lecter exudes a very specific type of hostility, Will remembers reading, *one that I have encountered in murderers before.*

She is not, after all, completely lacking in insight.

“What did you make of her articles?” Hannibal asks. Will can see the anxiety in the lines around Hannibal's eyes, but otherwise his mask is impenetrable.

Will keeps his voice mild, but he allows a degree of irony and sympathetic anger to show in his face. “Her writing is awful repetitive, isn’t it? By my count she referred to you as a ‘psychopath’ three times in the first paragraph, and never mind that that’s not a diagnosis that Ms. Lounds is qualified to make.”

Learning how to read Hannibal has been a refreshingly difficult project, and Will is not completely sure he’s entirely mapped out the man’s repertoire of micro-expressions, but the question on Hannibal’s face now is nearly naked in its transparency and its fear; Will *is* qualified, and Hannibal wants to know if he will.

Will offers no answer. He knows that his silence will dig at Hannibal more profoundly than any confirmation or denial.

“The comparison to a king snake was, in a backwards way, quite the compliment,” Will offers instead. “Though Ms. Lounds obviously meant it as an insult. They’re useful animals, Hannibal. When a king snake claims the space under your porch as his home, you never have to worry about the children or the dogs getting snakebit.”

Hannibal doesn’t answer. He remains almost entirely non-communicative for the rest of the session, running down the last five minutes on the clock while offering short responses that hardly meet the bare minimum for polite engagement. His anger is nearly tactile but lacking in any clear target, and Will is conscious of the possibility that he may have overplayed his hand.

When time is up, Hannibal leaves quickly, without lingering at the door for the the informal after-session conversation that Will has been encouraging over the last few weeks.

It catches up with Will, the thing that Hannibal put inside of him, almost as soon as the other man is gone.

He sits in the empty office, the lights dimmed, and focuses on his breathing until the wounded seething anger becomes less overwhelming. Will explores the feeling, turning it over in his mind to confirm its essential alienness, then balls it up and pushes it away from himself.

He isn't entirely sure that it’s gone, and that troubles him.

It has been a long time since someone else got that far into his head without an invitation, and longer still since Will has felt so unsure of his ability to expel them at will. His heart is racing, and he is not entirely sure if the primary cause is fear or excitement.

Chapter 3

Chapter by Pragnificent (PragmaticHominid)

“I don’t do anything special,” Hannibal insists, when Will once again asks about the process he uses to solve the cases. He says this, knowing that it is a lie and knowing that Will knows that he is lying.

He is still uneasy about last week. He knows that he behaved badly, came perilously close to losing his temper, but neither can he entirely shake the idea that Will had been playing some sort of head game with him.

It’s an absurdly paranoid thought - what reason would he have to do so? - yet Hannibal knows that his instincts are usually correct.

But then, his instincts are also usually at the heart of his problems.

“The Bureau is full of profilers and forensics specialists who got into this line of work because they aren’t in good enough shape to be serial killers,” Hannibal says. “I shouldn’t stand out the way that they act like I do.”

Will blinks when Hannibal says that. His mouth hangs open, just a tad and just for a second, before the tip of his tongue darts out to wet his lips, and then it closes again.

His reply comes rather late. “I can’t think that fitness would be a barrier for you.”

It’s Hannibal’s turn to blink, at least three different responses on the tip of his tongue and none of them especially socially acceptable. The one that comes closest to escaping is a question: *Are you flirting with me?*
Instead he says, stiffly, “I was joking.”

“You have a sharp sense of humor,” Will observes. If it is a value judgement, there’s no hint of that in his voice.

“It gets me into trouble,” Hannibal says. “The way that I am, I have to hold my own leash tightly. I need to be in control of what I say and do, so I don’t hurt anyone else and so people won’t be frightened of me.” He sighs, because of course despite everything that he does to try to seem unassuming and non-threatening, the calmly reserved persona and his careful policing of his desire to transgress others’ boundaries, people are still scared of him. Even when he manages to keep up the act, the rumors always catch up with him. “But I can’t seem to keep the damn jokes to myself.

“I know that they’re not funny,” he says, another obvious lie, and Will calls him on it this time.

“You mean that you know that other people rarely laugh at them,” he says.

“Normal people don’t appreciate puns at the autopsy table.”

“Humor is often a mask for anxiety,” Will suggests, “or other socially unacceptable emotions.”

Hannibal spreads his hands, the same gesture that Will often uses, though he is not consciously aware of it, and says, “Everything that I do carries the weight of calculation.”

“You don’t allow yourself many indulgences,” Will says. His eyes are understanding, but not in a soft way - not in a way that Hannibal feels to be condescending or degrading.

Those eyes have a power over Hannibal that he doesn’t understand, as much as he wants to.

Will often circles back around to the cases - how Hannibal does what he does and how it feels for him when he does it. Hannibal lets him. There are alternatives that would be harder to speak about.

He imagines that they are both, in nearly every way, almost absurdly transparent to each other. Later, when he begins to understand just how much he missed or misunderstood or deliberately refused to see about Will, the foolishness of that assumption will burn in a way that comes as near to shame as he is capable of.

Hannibal maintains areas of opacity, a few secrets that he can’t or won’t speak, but as time passes he wishes more and more that he could wipe away everything that obscures the hidden parts of him from Will, as one might clean a soaped window to allow the sun in.

There is in him a terrible hunger to articulate the truth of himself, as well as he understands it, but the fear of being seen and understood but yet rejected is sometimes nearly paralyzing.

But Will is patient with him. Will gives Hannibal the space that he needs to talk, and he watches Will carefully as he does so, waiting for the moment when he goes too far and sees disgust and hatred bloom in those warm eyes, but it never happens.

Often, Mischa is on the tip of his tongue. Before, he had thought that if that particular confession was to fall from his mouth he would shatter, or else would break anyone who heard to pieces. Sometimes he comes close to speaking of it to Will anyway, is nearly able to convince himself that to do so would be safe.

But then he thinks that even Will would turn away from him if he knew about Mischa - if he knew that Hannibal had taken the soup, knowing. Not even Will could deny that he was a monster then, nor fail to be troubled by that monstrosity. He talks around it.

He talks about being frightened of himself, nearly all of the time, but never more so than when he is looking at a crime scene and watching all of the pieces come together in his mind and knowing that in some fundamental way that so much of his talent is drawn from the fact that he shares the same emotionally numb patches within himself that so many of the killers he hunts have, but it is more than that.

Much more importantly - more damningly, he is sure - is the fact that he can look at the bodies and the blood and feel no disgust at that looking and no guilt for that lack of disgust, can look at them not simply as morally neutral puzzles, as some of the better profilers can, but with avid fascination, a delighted appreciation for the raw brutality or artful touches of cruelty.

“I don’t need the barriers that the others put up between themselves and the killers,” he explains during one session. “The others, even the really good profilers, they have to tell themselves that they’re different from the killers - and mostly, that’s the truth, although everyone has a little bit of that ugliness in them and most of the other profilers have a lot more than the standard dose.

“But they build walls out of disgust so they can feel okay about themselves inside of their heads, and then they disappoint themselves when they can’t see the full picture through the embrasures. I don’t need to waste time telling myself that I’m different from these killers, because I know that I’m not. Faux disgust and moral outrage aren’t a refuge for my own good opinion of myself, they are a pretext through which I try to hide myself from others - often poorly, I think, from the way people respond to me.

“The men that I have helped to catch - I like them, and I respect them, and often I envy them, and all of that is what gives me the tools that I need to hunt them.”

He does not, in that moment, reflect on the fact that he also likes Will. He is entirely focused on trying to see if Will still likes him, even after all that he has confessed.

Will reaches out picks up the timer that he uses to track the session’s duration. He turns it off and then looks back to Hannibal. Direct eye contact has always been tiring for him. It is less so with Hannibal, usually, but he has been watching Will so intently as he speaks, hunting for the rejection that he anticipates as inevitable, and it has been a struggle for Will to keep the relish with which he has received Hannibal’s confession from showing in his eyes.

He would like to look away now, to be alone with his own thoughts and feelings, the later of which have become a nearly overwhelmingly tangle of conflicting impulses. But he knows that if he does not shepherd Hannibal carefully through the next few minutes he might run from Will and the knowledge that Will now has of him.

“That’s the side of it that’s difficult for you,” Will says. “Tell me how it’s good.”

Hannibal lifts his chin; a princely posture, full of pride. “I save lives,” he tells Will.

“And that feels good?”

“It’s important.”

“Do you want to know what I see, when I look at you?” Will asks.

Hannibal's nod is brusque but steady. He hides the fear well. It shows only in the brief tremble of his Adam's apple and in the shining of his eyes.

He expects Will to turn away from him, Will knows. He is vulnerable now, and Will is strongly tempted to confirm all of the ideas that Hannibal has expressed about himself, to coax Hannibal further onto the path that Will would like to lead him down, but senses if he does so now Hannibal is likely to read that as condemnation rather than approval.

That will have to wait, he decides. What Hannibal needs now is reassurance, and only the truth will do for that.

"I think that you deny yourself credit, Hannibal, and that you have isolated yourself in a way that you don't deserve. And I think that you are so focused on policing the parts of yourself that you consider to be bad that you have no sense of your own core of goodness, and that this has been counter productive for you because it has resulted in the idea of your own badness growing in your eyes beyond its proper proportions. When you leave here, I want you to remember that thoughts are only thoughts, and that deeds are what matters. I want you to focus on the good things that you do, and next time you come back that's what I want to hear about."

Will watches resistance and relief war on Hannibal's nearly motionless face.

"There's something else I want you to consider, too, Hannibal. I'd like you to come over to my house for dinner soon. You don't have to agree now," Will reassures him, when alarm at the idea floods into his eyes, "but the type of lonesomeness that you have subjected yourself to is not healthy.

"It would be therapeutic for you, but I have my own selfish reasons, too. I would enjoy having your company."

Hannibal feels like a snake that's been milked of its venom when he leaves the session.

He is no less convinced of his essential dangerousness, but as he and Will continue to work on the problem he becomes more confident in his ability to control it.

When the idea that he might hurt someone again begins to feel like less of inevitability and more of a choice, it also becomes less frightening.

He goes to work and he isn't afraid to stand too close to his co-workers. He doesn't stop telling sharp-edged jokes, but he finds ways to make them more subtle so that they fly over most people's heads most of the time. When they are noticed, they are more likely to yield a laugh rather than concerned looks or outrage over his lack of good taste.

He smiles, and sees that people believe in the sincerity of those smiles, sees the way that he can make people warm up to him, if he wants to, and considers the ramifications of that - how much he could get away with, socially, if he learned how to put people at ease the way that Will knows how to put him at ease and used that skill to his own benefit.

The possibilities for manipulation are nearly endless, and he considers them, knowing that he feels no where near as ashamed of the thoughts as he ought to be but no longer bothering to be angry at himself over that. Will has said, many times, that such anger is counterproductive, and Hannibal has begun to believe that he is right.

He feels light and powerful and unafraid, in a way that he hasn't since childhood.

When Will extends the dinner invitation again, nearly two months after he first asked Hannibal to consider it, Hannibal barely hesitates before agreeing.

Chapter 4

Chapter by Pragnificent (PragmaticHominid)

Hannibal watches his hands as he uses the knife.

He is self-conscious about the size of those hands and of their obvious strength. He likes Will's better - neat and small, almost delicate-looking, though he knows that they are strong. He bets that no one has ever shied away from those tidy hands.

Looking up from the green tomatoes that Will has given him to cut up, Hannibal asks, "Have you ever had people act like they were frightened by you, just from how you look?"

Will is busy at the counter, but he turns and glances at Hannibal. His hands are shiny with olive oil, and spices stick to his palms and the undersides of his fingers. "Just by looking? No." He studies Hannibal, gaze level. "Everything alright?"

"Very much all right," Hannibal says. He knows that his face is not very demonstrative - half the product of nature and half long and careful practice - but he works to make the smile wider than what he would give anyone else. Will smiles back, easily, and then returns to his task.

Hannibal likes Will's house. It has a vaguely sinister southern charm, elaborate dark-grained antique furniture and a lot of gleaming brass, but it's nonetheless homey. The small kitchen table that he's sitting at now is even a little battered, though he suspects that it's worth more than he makes in a month. Paintings and photographs of hunting dogs adorn the walls of every room that Hannibal has seen so far.

Hannibal is struck by how happy he is to be here. He knows for sure now that Will isn't afraid of him. He wasn't hiding his nervousness behind a professional demeanor or locking it away for the duration of their sessions.

He simply has no fear of Hannibal.

Will put a knife into Hannibal's hand and turned his back on him, and wasn't even slightly afraid to do it.

The kitchen is large and astonishingly well-appointed, and Hannibal thinks that he could happily get lost in it. He indulges in a small domestic fantasy; moving about this kitchen while the early morning light filters through the lace curtains, making breakfast, and then… and then?

Going back upstairs to bring Will breakfast in bed, of course.

A wildly inappropriate thought, he knows, and glances up to Will to see if he's caught it - sometimes it almost seems like he can read Hannibal's mind - but Will's back is still to him.

Hannibal takes advantage of the view, wondering distantly what the normal measure of guilt is for such a relatively harmless impropriety.

When the main dish is in the oven, Will takes the chair beside Hannibal. They sit in companionable silence, and the feeling of doing so is very different from being with Will in the office. It's comfortable.

Hannibal looks around the room again, not really focusing on anything, simply enjoying the bright and airy space and the smell of green tomato chutney simmering on the stove top, and his eyes fall on the large photo that hangs over the table.

Half a dozen hounds seem almost to pose on the front porch of an extravagant plantation home. Long-legged, their coats are mottled shades of black, grey and brown, with scattered white patches on the faces and chests. Hannibal feels that there is a nearly uncanny intelligence in their pale blue eyes, and it makes him a bit uneasy.

Will sees him looking. "Those are some of my best dogs," he says, fondness and pride evident in his voice. "They're Catahoula Hounds - finest bloodlines in the state of Louisiana, if you don't mind me boasting. They aren't just pretty, either - they're hunting dogs. Once they hit on a trail there's not a feral hog in the world that can lose them, no matter how clever he might be. I trained them myself.

"They deserve as much credit for the meal we're about to have tonight as I do."

Will keeps things informal. They eat at the same small kitchen table where Hannibal sliced the vegetables, rather than moving to the dining room with its long elaborate mahogany table.

The meal is cider-brined roast tenderloin with a green tomato chutney, simple yet elegant. When Will puts the plate down in front of him, Hannibal says, "Looks wonderful," but he is troubled.

He is not a vegetarian but often times he has difficulty stomaching meat, and pork especially can be challenging. He'd intended to power through, to ride out the nausea by focusing on Will and the enjoyment he draws from Will's company, but there is something about the medallions of roasted tenderloin that make him deeply anxious.

Hannibal brings his knife and fork to the meat, yet hesitates even to cut.

"Hannibal?" Will says, and he looks up to see that Will is watching him closely, a troubled frown on his face. "I didn't realize that you don't eat pork - or is it meat at all? I'm sorry, I ought to have asked. I can get you something else -"

"No, don't worry," Hannibal says quickly. "This is excellent, really," and to prove it he slices off a bite of the tenderloin and puts it in his mouth.

The meat is not pork.

Panic draws black curtains around Hannibal as he staggers to his feet, and distantly he hears the heavy kitchen chair tip over and crash to the floor behind him. It is three long strides to the kitchen sink, and he barely makes it there in time. Hannibal locks his fingers around the edge of the sink and retches.

Later, he will curse himself, wonder why his first instinct was to avoid the rudeness of vomiting on his friend's rug rather than to fight or flee.

Will has gone somewhere else, briefly, but Hannibal hears him coming back now. Even the sound of his footsteps on the floor seem kind.

He says, "Let me help you," and Hannibal feels a hand on the small of his back, rubbing in solicitous circles, and then the needle enters the side of his neck.

Whatever was in the syringe hits hard and fast, but Hannibal doesn't go down at once.

He pushes back against Will, knocking him away, and spinning for the table he lunges for the knife that he'd left beside his plate. His hand closes around the handle but then Will is on him, riding him with his forearm locked across Hannibal's throat, and Hannibal can not breathe.

Hannibal reaches back and slashes with the knife. He is rewarded by a sharp hiss of pain and the bright scent of blood, but Will does not let go, and the world is going black around him.

He falls.

Chapter 5

Chapter by Pragnificent (PragmaticHominid)

The bed Hannibal wakes up in is neat and tidy. The linens have a fresh lemony smell and the luxuriously soft quilt is hand-stitched, and none of this distracts from the fact that he is shackled at the ankle by a steel cuff.

Will sits perhaps eight feet away. His hair is untidy, wild curls loose in a way that Hannibal has never seen before, and Hannibal is infuriated with himself because there is beauty in that for him, and in the freshly stitched gash in Will's cheek.

Hannibal feels Will watching him as he sits up and makes a study of the chain that runs from his ankle to a stake, deeply embedded in the concrete floor of the basement. He yanks at it briefly, out of compulsion, though he knows that he won't be able to pull free. After that he leaves it alone.

"I've seen setups like this before," Hannibal says, his mouth feeling as though it has been stuffed with cotton, "though this is the first one with feather pillows."

"Your comfort is important to me, Hannibal."

Hannibal doesn't justify that with a response.

He looks around the basement. A half-empty bottle of bourbon and two snifter glasses sit on the small table next to Will. On the other end of the basement, metal tools hang from a pegboard on the wall, gleaming dangerously, and in the corner there is a large stainless steel work table with two meat hooks hanging near it.

Hannibal works on accepting what all of this means without letting it frighten him. He tries to draw on the colder version of himself, the one that kept his feelings on lockdown and didn't worry about Will or Will's approval.

"I didn't intend for you to find out about this," Will says, and it's hard to know if he should credit the note of apology in his voice. "And I wasn't expecting dinner to give me away. Hannibal, there's something important that you haven't been sharing in your sessions, isn't there?"

When he doesn't answer, Will says, "This must be an awful shock to you."

His voice is slurred. At first, Hannibal had attributed it to large gash he'd left in Will's left cheek, but he realizes now that Will is tremendously drunk.

"No," Hannibal says, slowly, as the pieces begin to slide into place for him. "In retrospect, it's not that surprising at all."

Will picks up the bottle of bourbon and pours two fingers worth into the empty glass. His own glass already holds considerably more, but he tops it off while he's at it.

He stands to offer the glass to Hannibal and sees the suspicion build in his eyes.

“I wouldn't poison good bourbon, Hannibal. I'm not such a monster as that.”

He sips at the glass to drive the point home. Hannibal lifts his arm from the mattress and reaches towards Will, as though he expects him to close the distance between them. It’s a good effort, Will supposes.

He shakes his head sadly. “Stand and come as close to me as your chain allows, please.” When Hannibal does Will tells him, “Now stretch your arm out towards me. No - further, Hannibal, I can see that you’re trying to leave yourself enough give to grab me. Come on now, I don’t want to mess around.”

Will passes the glass to Hannibal’s outstretched fingers. Hannibal sinks back to the edge of the bed and Will returns to his chair and his glass.

“The way I see it,” Will explains, "I have three options, each of which may spawn its own stem of new options.

“I can kill you,” he says, and pauses to watch how Hannibal takes that; a completely flat affect, not the slightest ripple of emotion.

“Or I could keep you captive. There are enough quiet little holes that I could stuff you into, though I’d worry that you’d find a way to make things difficult for me, and sooner rather than later.” Still, Hannibal’s face is an unpainted mask.

“Or… I could let you go.”

The last gets a reaction, and a powerful one.

Hannibal snarls at him, upper lip crinkled upwards to show remarkably sharp teeth.

Will beams with delight. “There it is,” he says, and if there is a note of awe in his voice he is inclined to attribute it to the booze. “I’ve seen your upper lip twitch so many times, when you are disgusted or angry, that first small motion on the way to a snarl, but always brought to heel, cut tragically short. I’ve been wondering for months now how I might induce you to complete that snarl, and here we are.”

He works his own face around the expression, mimicking it, delighted even when the wound on his cheek begins to seep blood.

“You aren’t going to let me go,” Hannibal says, the disdain thick in his voice. “You’re running a head game on me, and a cliched one at that.

“It’s lazy, doctor. We both know what you’re going to do."

"Do we?" Will asks. Hannibal goes on as though he hasn't spoken.

“You are going to hurt me, for as long as you can before it gets boring for you or until I stop giving you what you want or until you become too excited to hold back any longer, then you are going to kill me.” He studies the tools on the wall analytically, and Will can see the gears turning in his head and knows that Hannibal is trying to decide which of them Will is likely to use on him and in what ways. “Then, I suppose that you are going to eat me.”

That last bit is the only point in which Will can sense anything approaching fear in his voice. It might just be Will's imagination.

Will pauses long enough to drain his glass. He sits it down on the table and leans forward in his chair, watching Hannibal intently. “Do you think that because if you were in my position that’s what you would do to me?”

“There’s nothing else you can do." Hannibal looks down at his hands, which are folded neatly in his lap, and shrugs. “I’m too dangerous to you alive.”

Will’s own hands feel nowhere near so calm, and he wonders if he is subconsciously picking up on anxiety that Hannibal has suppressed so well as for it to be nearly imperceivable or if it is his own authentic emotions that make him want to wring his hands.

To keep busy he pours himself another drink. He swirls the amber liquid around in the glass, considering.

After a while, Will sighs. “In all honesty, you’re probably right. But I don’t want to kill you, Hannibal.”

Hannibal looks up at that, cocks his head to the side as he watches Will.

“Convince me that there's some way I can avoid it.” He raises a finger quickly, cautioning. “But if you lie to me, Hannibal, I’ll know, and you'll pay for it.

“I’m better at this than most of the killers you’ve collared - I don’t get frustrated or discouraged and I don’t rush through anything. It will take a very long time and it will be ugly for you. Do you believe me?”

Hannibal say, “I do.”

It’s strange, how the note of pleading that ought to be in Hannibal’s voice somehow ends up in Will’s own mouth when he says, “Then convince me.”

Chapter 6

Chapter by Pragnificent (PragmaticHominid)

Honesty does not come naturally to Hannibal, but he has been open about himself with Will, in a manner and to a degree that is entirely unprecedented for him. But the type of confession he makes now comes so much harder - might never have come, without the incentive of those gleaming tools hanging in their ordered rows on the wall - and he rushes into it.

“I think,” he says, already feeling exposed and raw, “that, before what happened at dinner, I was falling into love with you.”

“Christ,” Will says. He sits his glass down hard.

For a moment Hannibal thinks that he’s made a bad mistake - that on top of everything else there's a good ol' boy hiding behind Will's cultured veneer, outraged by such an admission from another man.

But then he sees that Will isn’t disgusted - he simply doesn’t believe him. And that worries Hannibal, because he sees that if Will decides to put a wall up around himself there will be nothing that he can do to breach it.

“If you’re going to insist on running a line of bullshit at least do better than that,” Will says. His voice is flat - bored.

It hurts, seeing that indifference, even if it feels performative. In some sort of fundamental way it hurts more than everything else that Hannibal has learned tonight, and he is suddenly viciously angry - he’d break Will to pieces if he could gets his hands on him.

Hannibal is snarling again and he hates that, because he knows that he is giving Will exactly what he's after, but he can’t seem to control his face well enough to stop.

“You don’t love me, Hannibal. You don’t even know me - you’d never have ended up down here if you did.”

“I know how I feel.” Angrily, he says this, through clenched teeth. He had meant to confess that the feeling was a new thing for him and that he wasn't sure if he had identified it correctly, but the anger cements his certainty that what has building inside of him for all these months was love.

Will gives a bitter little laugh. “But you don’t, Hannibal. You know that I have intimate knowledge of you and that feels like love to you because framing it that way makes you feel less vulnerable. That’s all you feel.”

He knows Will is engaging in obscuration, that he is rationalizing away what Hannibal has told him to the point of self-deceit. He suspects Will knows this too.

Will picks up his glass again. “Is that all you have to offer me?”

“Did you need to get so drunk before you killed the others?”

Hannibal is beginning to understand how much danger there is in Will’s warm little smiles. “No,” he says, flatly, and this time Hannibal knows that he isn’t lying. “I had a good time with the others sober.

"I’ve already told you that I don’t want to kill you, Hannibal, but I can do everything that I need to do shitfaced. Don’t you worry about that.”

His eyes, when they meet Hannibal’s, are mean. Hannibal can tell that it’s a forced meanness, a type of meanness that Will has put on like armor to protect himself from what he has decided to do, but Hannibal does not believe that will make any practical difference. “‘I think I was falling in love with you,’” he repeats, and Hannibal sees the way his anger hooks on the past tense in that sentence and tears painfully. "Shit.

“It’s so funny," Will continues. "You’ve caught how many serial killers - half a dozen?”

“Eight."

“But you never saw me coming.”

In that moment he looks like a fat spider to Hannibal, bloated with self-satisfaction at his own sense of wicked cleverness.

Hannibal knows that he is already dead. Nothing he says now matters, so he says what he wants to say - what he knows will cut.

“I didn’t see you because you’re phony,” he says. “You’re a sad clown in Halloween horror makeup, trying to convince yourself that if you convince enough people that you’re a real monster then that’ll make it true. But everything about this is derivative, doctor. That’s why you were so interested in the cases and my insights into them, isn’t it? You kept asking and I thought, ‘well, he’s a bit of voyeur for this type of thing but many people are, and talking about it does help me, and anyway I’m not in any position to judge.’

"But you wanted to check for authenticity, make sure you were matching up not just in design and deed but on an emotional level. You’re fake - you and your corny little torture basement are some of the shoddiest fronts that I've ever seen.

“I’m the real thing. *Me.* ” He pounds his open palm against his chest. His heart rate is normal - steady and even. “And I’m stronger than you, because I don’t need anyone else to validate my own innate monstrosity for me.

“I know what I am. But you don’t, do you?”

Will sighs, feigning annoyed indifference. "You’re still so fixated on this idea of an authentic self - my own, god help us, as well yours. There’s no such thing, Hannibal. You are what you choose to be.” Will stands, brushes his hands against the sides of his jeans. “Right now,

you’re choosing to be someone who dies screaming in a ‘corny little torture basement.’ Are you sure that’s who you want to be?”

Hannibal doesn’t answer him. He wonders if Will knows how blatantly his own desperation is showing through. It seems possible that he may really believe that Hannibal can’t read his face.

“Why don’t you just strong-arm it?” Hannibal demands, and is not especially surprised by how tired his voice sounds. “Why don’t you just tell me that I need you, that no one else is going to put up with listening to the things that I’ve got rolling around in my head? Tell me that I have to keep your secrets, because otherwise I’ll be alone again.”

Will’s eyes make quick, flickering movements as he considers that. Hannibal feels that for the first time since this all began he is looking at a version of Will that he recognizes completely. It is nearly enough to make him regret what he has done. “If the only terms on which I can have you is on the basis of your belief that I’m the only one who can stomach you, Hannibal, then I don’t want you. I put a lot of work into convincing you that you are better than that and I'm disappointed to see that it hasn't stuck.”

Will turns his back on him and walks away. Hannibal hears him pause halfway up the stairs. He doesn’t move his head to see, but he knows that Will is looking down at him.

“I told you the truth,” Hannibal says. “Everything that I said was true.”

“I know,” Will answers, after a brief hesitation. “But it doesn’t make any difference. If you walk out of here the first thing that you’re going to do is go right to Jack Crawford and tell him the truth, too, or at least enough of it to hang me with.

“I’m sorry, Hannibal. This isn’t what I wanted for you.”

Will closes the door behind himself, and Hannibal hears the lock engage.

Chapter 7

Chapter by Pragnificent (PragmaticHominid)

Hannibal rarely sleeps well, and never deeply. There have been long stretches of time when he has felt himself to be coming out ahead if he gets four full hours a night.

He sleeps easily during that night in Will's basement, though, and strangely there are no nightmares.

When the smell of heating cooking oil in the kitchen above him wakes Hannibal, he finds himself feeling refreshed and prepared to face the day's challenges, whatever they might be. He looks at his watch and is astonished to see that it is nearly noon.

Will is nearly silent, coming down the steps. That concerns Hannibal, because he isn't entirely sure that he would have woken up had Will tried to sneak up on him.

He looks a wreck, though. "I'm sorry we missed breakfast," he says. "I overslept."

Hannibal wonders about that. Will's eyes are bloodshot, and he's wearing the same outfit that he had on the day before, wrinkled now and disheveled. His hair has gone from slightly out of control to a greasy nest of wild tangles.

It's easier, this morning, for Hannibal to control the way his heart wants to jump at the sight of Will absent the polished veneer he'd worn in his office, but easier isn't the same thing as easy.

"You mean that you blacked out," Hannibal says. Will shrugs, unwilling to argue the distinction.

Hannibal watches Will carefully as he approaches with the tray, and is careful to seem as though he isn't watching. The night before he measured exactly how far the chain will allow him to reach and marked that borderline in his mind. There is a possibility that Will might stumble into his territory, or else that when he bends over to sit the tray on the floor his head might come into reach, giving Hannibal a chance to grab a handful of those messy curls, but none of these things happen.

He might be little better than a copycat, but even catastrophically hungover and in an emotional tailspin, Will knows this business too well to make such basic mistakes.

Fried chicken on the crystal tray, blatantly identifiable as exactly what it is. Collard greens in a heavily peppered cream sauce. Warm biscuits with butter and jam.

Hannibal looks up at Will. "Comfort food," he observes. "Who do you feel needs to be comforted, Will? Are your trying to make me feel better or yourself?"

Will glances at Hannibal from out of the corner of his eye, but looks quickly away. He doesn't answer. He is folded in around himself, but not in the defiantly vicious way he'd been the night before. It is almost as though he is sleepwalking.

Hannibal has the sense that Will is sitting at the center of a carefully constructed castle that has suddenly and irrevocably been torn down around him, trying to pile the broken rubble high enough to afford some sort of protection.

It makes him sad. He could poke at Will more, but he doesn't feel like it.

It's only now, trapped in this ugly place and seeing the way that Will has contorted himself to fit inside the monster suit that he's built, that Hannibal's efforts to resist his own nature and desires begins to seem to him to be in some way noble. He has known himself in ways that Will cannot imagine, and his relationship to that knowledge has not been, as Will wanted him to believe, pointless self-flagellation. He has made mistakes, he knows, some of them damning, but always he has striven towards decency as well as he could, even when it was difficult.

He clings to that new sense of his own strength of character. If it's the only thing he has left when this is all over, he supposes that it's something.

Will sits with his hands tangled in a ball in his lap and watches Hannibal eat, but covertly, without meeting Hannibal's eyes. Hair hangs down over his face in tired ringlets.

Hannibal is not too concerned about the possibility of the food being drugged; he is certain that his palate is sensitive enough catch that. But there might be some small measure of… that, hidden in the food somehow, maybe a dollop of fat added to the oil in which the chicken was fried. What things look like on the surface are not, he knows, necessarily what they are.

He eats anyway, weighing the risks and deciding that the priority must be to keep his strength up, and discovers upon taking the first bite that he's ravenous.

The meal feels like an apology. It's too little too late, but at least his stomach does not rebel against it.

When he is done he walks to the end of his chain and sits the tray down on the floor next to Will, giving it a little shove to push it well outside of his own reach.

Hannibal crouches in front of Will. Were he to stretch his arm out as far as he possibly could the tips of his fingers would fall perhaps a foot short of Will's knee.

Will does not acknowledge him. Hannibal waits. He is patient. He has nowhere else to be.

When Will finally meets his eyes, Hannibal says, "Let me go, Will. Please."

Will slides sideways out of the chair and goes back upstairs.

When the basement door opens again, some time later, Hannibal knows that Will is coming for him.

Art by Sparkyhero:

LET ME GO, WILL.
PLEASE.

Chapter 8

Chapter by Pragnificent (PragmaticHominid)

Will is steadier now that he knows what he has to do and how to do it.

That was what he told himself, anyway, before he paused on the steps to look down at Hannibal. He is laying on his back on the bed, hands folded behind his head. His elbows make sharp angles.

When he sees Will is watching Hannibal smiles up at him. Will grips the banister hard.

The gun in its hostler feels like a millstone. It feels like a snake that's like to bite him.

Will's never cared for guns, though he's used them before, but the two times that Hannibal has killed it has been with a gun.

Hannibal does not turn his head when Will stops in front of him. If he did, he would see how close Will is, well within his reach. Foolish not to look, Will thinks, but then he wonders if Hannibal knows exactly where he is standing anyway.

"It's something of a relief," Hannibal says to the ceiling. "I always worried that I would eventually end up on the other side of the knife, but this way I get to go out the victim."

Will feels invisible. He feels inconsequential - faded inside of his own skin and in his own mind. It's been so long since he felt this way that he had almost forgotten what a nightmare it is.

Hannibal did this to him, Will knows.

Will reaches into his pocket and fingers the thing that he has there. The metal is warm with the heat of his own body.

"When they catch you - and you will be caught, Will, you know - I'm going to be so well liked. People who wouldn't have given me the time of day, everyone who acted like they were going to piss themselves every time I looked at them? They're all going to be my friends and they are all going to tell each other how much they valued me and how sad it all is and what a hero I was.

"It's funny, isn't it?" Hannibal says. "Other than my sister, I think you are the only one who ever really liked me. But here we are anyway."

The key lands noiselessly on Hannibal's stomach. Hannibal lifts his head from the pillow to look at what Will has thrown at him, and the astonishment that flashes briefly across Hannibal's face when he sees the key is the only truly gratifying thing about this entire fiasco.

It's good to know that Hannibal hasn't gotten so far under his skin that Will can't still take him by surprise.

Hannibal's hand closes over the key and he sits up. He does not hurry.

"There's no point in trying to elicit promises or set terms," Will says, and Hannibal's hand pauses en-route to the shackle lock as Hannibal looks up to watch him as he speaks. "You'll do whatever you decide you want to do."

The shackle clicks open and Hannibal allows it to fall to the ground. He rubs the chaffed skin, eyes still on Will.

There is a long still moment. Will can imagine many different things that might follow now.

Then Hannibal is on him, knocking him to the ground and then following after. The back of Will's head hits the cement floor and Will's vision blurs, and then Hannibal is using his fists on him and Will is disappointed, because there is nothing transcendent or splendid about the beating that Hannibal is laying on him, and no artistry whatsoever.

The pounding is dull and repetitive, and he supposes that if Hannibal keeps it up it will kill him eventually, and the idea that Hannibal might not only have decided on killing him but to kill him in this way when so many better options surround him is the most disappointing thing of all. Will goes away from it, goes wandering inside his head along the creeks and swamp lands that he has laid out there in such vivid detail.

When Will circles back around he finds that Hannibal is no longer on top of him. He stands a few feet away, looking down at Will. His eyes are glassy. His chest rises and falls quickly.

He's taken the gun, as Will thought he might, but it hangs limply in Hannibal's hand. He hopes that Hannibal feels safer with it in hand; if he feels himself to be in control he will, perhaps, make better choices.

Will's blood is on his hands, mixing with the blood that wells from his torn knuckles.

Will had been attempting to inventory himself, but now his mind catches on the question of what their mingled blood might taste like.

He braces himself with his arms and sits up.

"Why did you stop?"

Will knows, probably, but he doesn't allow himself to face that knowledge fully. He is not, he believes at the core of himself, a suitable object of love.

Hannibal doesn't answer.

Against his own will, Will's head sags forward. His vision is blurry as he watches the blood that drips from his face form small pools on the concrete floor.

He listens to the fall of Hannibal's footsteps as he walks away.

Chapter 9

Chapter by Pragnificent (PragmaticHominid)

When Hannibal thinks about what he did to Will in the basement and what he ought to do now, it is with the same nettling unease that followed his first deadly force encounter.

When the Douglass boy came at him it had been so easy for Hannibal to pull the trigger, and the sense of fulfillment that followed was nearly indescribable. He'd thought that it might be the same feeling that a mathematician experienced upon solving a theorem on which they had labored for years, the sudden joyous rush of finally *understanding*, but so much more personal because it was the puzzle of himself that Hannibal answered.

He'd rushed to hide his pleasure, desperate that it should remain unseen, and that was when the unease began to slip in, because he'd expected to have to justify himself. He'd been prepared for others to feel angry or disgusted by him, and had been ready to feign guilt and grief and regret and whatever else was needed to smooth over those conflicts.

Instead, they behaved as though Hannibal had done something heroic, gunning down some white trash meth-head with a three-inch pocket knife that he'd probably bought for eight dollars at the mall. The other officers made his justifications for him, readily offered support and reassurance that he had done the right thing. The union steward told him that the union had his back and his boss told him that everything he had done fell well within regulations.

Men he'd barely spoken to before wanted to buy him drinks. Hannibal demurred, worried that he might not be able to keep the words that wanted to come spilling out of his mouth locked away, all of his confusion and frustration and simmering rage over the platitudes to which they insisted on subjecting him.

The Douglass boy had hardly been eighteen and was maybe a hundred and twenty pounds soaking wet, too high to walk a straight line and almost certainly lacking the guts to really try to use that piddling little knife anyway, but his essential harmlessness made no difference in how he or his death was spoken of.

People who knew nothing more of the addict than that Hannibal had shot him dead declared, through insinuation and openly, that his life had been worthless. Everything in Hannibal rebelled against this. In the very fibers of his being, Hannibal understood that Douglass' life, however ragged and miserable as it might have been, had been of nearly unfathomable value; had this not been so, taking it would not have brought such satisfaction.

This understanding was, of course, not something that he could speak out loud.

He listened to his co-workers drag Douglass through the mud for the sake of making Hannibal look clean by comparison, and soon understood how self-serving it all was. They wished to exonerate Hannibal from any blame with the expectation that if they were to find themselves in his shoes they would enjoy the same treatment.

With this understanding came a growing sense of distaste. He wondered what it would be like, killing one of the people who felt their own lives to be so much more worthy than that of Hannibal's first, if they would fight as hard to stay alive as Douglass had, lying in the mud with hot lead in his chest and his lungs filling up with blood.

At the time, he had been very concern that there would be others soon, but he had gotten through it. Almost twenty years had passed between Douglass and Stammets. He was proud of that.

It was not in Hannibal to regret what he had done but he knew, even when he was squeezing the trigger, that it was a wrong thing to do - that there were better ways that he could have handled it.

It had been murder, what he'd done. It was a fact about himself, like the color of his eyes or his middle name - he had done a murder. It was the hypocrisy of how that murder was dealt with that got under his skin, that apparently normal people refused to acknowledge what was obvious to him.

Learning that he would not be held accountable for what he had done disgusted him - and it tempted him, far too strongly, to want to find out if he could get away with it again - and that had been why he turned in his badge.

It had been so good to be able to talk about things like this with Will. He'd been able to voice thoughts and feelings and ideas that he'd never told anyone else to Will, and felt that he was understood.

Had he killed Will, he knows, they would have made a hero of him, the same as they would have if Will had killed him.

He knows too that if he ever tried to explain to anyone else what had driven him to beat Will that he would not be understood. His violence would be justified as instrumental and necessary. He would be told that he was smart to trick the killer into letting his guard down, brave to fight him, too kindhearted for having left him alive.

He thinks, *if I were normal I would not have hit him like that*, but another voice says, *if you were normal you would have shot him dead.*

Hannibal knows that he should do exactly what Will said he would do - he should find a phone and call Jack. Immediately.

This is not what he does.

Hannibal sends his resignation letter via email, and when Jack shows up at his door to argue about it Hannibal does not allow him inside the house.

He does not tell Jack about Will.

He tells no one.

A week passes.

The digital clock on Hannibal’s dashboard says 7:25 when he parks outside of Will’s office. A little early for their regular appointment, and he sits behind the wheel, watching the building. The lights are on inside, and though he can see no movement behind the curtains he knows that doesn’t necessarily mean anything.

Will is observant and Hannibal’s car is not entirely silent. He takes it for granted that Will knows he is here, though he doesn’t deceive himself into thinking that he can predict what Will might do about it.

When the door opens, spilling light out into the dark parking lot, Hannibal sees Will’s head in profile. Hannibal's gun is locked in the glove box. It would be easy to drop Will from this angle, if Hannibal felt inclined to take a shot.

Instead, he gets out of the car and walks towards Will. He is not afraid, doing this, but he is very aware of his surroundings and the movements of his own body.

Will holds the door open for him and he goes inside.

Chapter 10

Chapter by Pragnificent (PragmaticHominid)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal sits down in his usual place. Will takes the chair across from him, as he always has.

Even in the low golden light of the office, Will's face looks bad.

He's a mottle of bruises, vivid reds and purples and blues, just beginning to fade to a sickly yellow around the edges. Will's nose, which Hannibal knew at the time that he'd broken in at least one place, is swollen now beneath the nose brace.

The stitches from the knife wound torn open when he was laying into Will, and his fists did a lot of additional damage there too. When he'd left the basement that side of Will's face had looked about as ugly as anything he'd seen on a living person. A rectangular white bandage covers it now, of course.

Hannibal motions to the left side of his own face. "How bad is it?"

"I have excellent surgeons," Will says. "I'm glad. It's important that I be able to put people at ease."

Hannibal catches his upper lip between his teeth, then lets it go quickly. He looks into the open space over Will's shoulder. "I shouldn't have worked you over like that," he says.

Will laughs at him.

"How in the world did you get so twisted up?" he wonders. "You've taken feigned idiot sensitivity and elevated it halfway to martyrdom.

"I might have shot you in the back while you were going up the stairs. I was seriously considering it, you know. I probably would have."

Before, Hannibal had thought Will's face an open book, but he no longer trusts his ability to read him. He is not sure if Will's lying or not - but he thinks it likely that Will himself doesn't know.

"I knew that was a possibility," Hannibal says, truthfully. "It was how I justified myself when I decided that I was going to hit you. But after a certain point it stopped being about self-defense - about disarming you or making sure that you didn't come after me with a different weapon. I decided to keep going even after I didn't need to anymore."

"You were in control of yourself when you were beating me," Will says. It is not a question.

He does not try to hide behind excuses by claiming that fear had driven him or that he'd lost his temper. “Yes. I knew what I was doing while I was doing it.”

“Control is important to you.”

“To you, too.”

“You were angry because you felt deceived.”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“Dirtied. I liked you so much, and I’d thought that you liked me too -”

“I do like you, Hannibal,” Will puts in, but he says it in such an off-handed way that Hannibal isn’t sure if he should believe it. It could be mockery.

Hannibal goes on. “But then I found out, and it wasn’t just that I felt foolish for having not realized. I couldn’t stop thinking, ‘What’s it say about me that this is one of the first people I ever really felt a connection toward?’”

“You tried to use your fists to distance yourself from me emotionally,” Will says. “You wanted to convince yourself that you felt nothing for me, or else that what you felt was of no significance.”

Hannibal’s gotten used to Will being able to parse his own feelings out for him in easily understood terms, but it’s still a shock to see him cut through a problem that he’d been worrying over for the last week with such ease.

Will asks, “Did it work?”

Hannibal doesn’t want to answer that - the answer is obvious, anyway. “Does it work for you?”

“Splendidly,” Will says, voice dry. “We aren’t talking about me.”

“I'd like for us to do just that.” Will knows so much about him, and most of what Hannibal thought he knew about Will has turned out to be little more than an elaborate set of lies. The rest is hazy.

He sees Will weighing that. Hannibal could point out that he already has enough to information to hang Will, so there’s no point in hiding now - especially if he’s still considering killing Hannibal anyway, which he suspects Will might be. But he waits quietly.

Will nods, finally, and spreads his hands. A concession.

But it takes him time to say anything else. It’s surprising to him that it seems to be so hard for Will to begin. It had been much easier for Hannibal.

“The last time someone laid his fists on me the way you did I was twelve,” Will says, “and I killed him for it.”

Hannibal is struck again by Will’s need for theatrics and dramatic statements, how facts don’t seem to enough to sustain his sense of himself as dangerous, no matter how damning those facts are.

He doesn’t say anything though, and after moment Will goes on.

Chapter End Notes

"You’ve taken feigned idiot sensitivity and elevated it halfway to martyrdom" is a slightly modified version of a line from a novel that I like, "GEEK LOVE" by Kathrine Dunn.

Chapter 11

Chapter by Pragnificent (PragmaticHominid)

Will wonders how to explain to Hannibal what it is like; the way it is for him to kill and what it does for him - not only the feeling of the act itself, but the way that it stabilizes him for months and sometimes even years afterwards.

He bleeds everything about himself that is hard to manage or overwhelming into his victims, and once they have been made to take on all of his fear and weakness and the anger that otherwise might have torn him to shreds, he can in killing them kill all of those things inside of him too, at least for a little while, and thus feel cleansed.

There is such a lightness to him after taking a life. How to explain the ease with which killing allows him to move among others without feeling afraid or impatient, how warm and kind and gentle he can be with everyone he meets afterwards, and at no great cost to himself?

It is for Will the easiest and most natural thing in the world, but even if Hannibal were to accept the truth of what Will sees in him, somehow he doesn't believe that Hannibal would understand the love that Will has for the ones who have died to give him the gift of such tranquility, or the place of honor they hold in his memory and the fondness that he has for them in his heart.

He is as deeply in love with that bright, bubbling version of himself that emerges after taking a life as he is with his own darkness and every reflection of that darkness that he sees in others. He has reveled in the knowledge that he contains endless multitudes, though he is acutely aware that he is more than others believe he ought to be and that so much of that excess must remain hidden.

Will wets his lips, allows a shade of the vulnerability he is feeling to show in his eyes when he looks at Hannibal. "I'm not sure how to talk about any of this," he says. "It's strange. Before you found me out, I had never considered the possibility of doing so."

"I told you about myself."

"Yes, well - nothing you told me was prosecutable," he says, though he knows if Hannibal decides to turn on him he already has more than enough information to set into motion the gears that would tear down the life that he's built.

It is in him to say to Hannibal, This is how I was able to treat you well, right up until it wasn't safe for me to do so anymore, and it is how I maintain my ability to help you and all of my other patients. If I didn't have this everything that I am would be lost in the chaos of other people's thoughts and feelings. I would be broken.

The words stick in his throat.

It’s the story of Will’s father that Hannibal has asked for, that first kill that was the best and the worst of them all, fundamentally different from all of the others yet also the seed that had shown him how he might quiet the conflict within his own mind. There are times when Will thinks that if he hadn’t gotten up the guts to take that shot his entire life might have turned out differently.

When Will begins to speak it is of the red hot nimbus of righteous rage that surrounded him when he raised the rifle and lined his father up in the sight, and of the sense of peace that came on him as his finger squeezed the trigger, knowing that in this small action he would make an end of the old man and that in doing so he would also bring an end to all of the beatings and the bruises and the broken bones.

He watches Hannibal closely as he says this to see if any pity creeps into him. Pity is not a vice that Hannibal is given to, Will knows, but he's not incapable of it, and there is in the man a confounding softness for Will, no matter what he has seen or how hard Will has tried to push him away.

Were Hannibal to attempt to degrade him with pity now it would be easy for Will to do away with him, a course of action that he has not yet put entirely out of mind, but Hannibal does no such thing.

“When I squeezed the trigger I felt really calm for the first time since my mother disappeared, and to a degree that I’d never felt before.”

Hannibal chews on that. “Did he have something to do with her disappearance?”

“You’re asking if he killed her?” Will says, and Hannibal nods. “I have my suspicions, but I was never able to prove anything. Before that winter, it had been my job to give the dogs their meat, but he took over that chore days after she went missing. I thought, too, that there was something off about the batch of jerky that he packed when we finally went hunting again, after she 'left us,' but it was only years later that I made that association. I still can’t be entirely sure that I’m right.”

Hannibal pales a little at that, or at least Will imagines that he does. “Is that the reason -” he begins, and Will says flatly, “No.”

Will goes on. “He didn’t die from the load of buckshot in his back - at least not right away. I was surprised by that, but I had my knife for the rest of it, so it was alright.

“He was confused at first - I don’t think he understood that he’d been shot, let alone who had done it - and when he started to realize he was frightened. It felt good, turning the tables like that - seeing him being afraid instead of being the thing that I was afraid of.

"It was over with too quickly. For a long time after I regretted having used the gun, but I've forgiven myself for it. I was young, and small for a twelve year old, and my old man was built strong. I couldn't have taken him down any other way.

“It was a hard piece of working, getting the body into the bayou, but once I got it in there it was taken care of. A boot washed up, a few days later, with his foot still inside of it. That was

good, too, because it confirmed the story that I was hoping people would make for themselves - he'd been out hunting and through some misfortune the gators got him."

Hannibal leans forward in the chair, eager to voice what he's taken away from everything Will's said. "You killed him for your mother," he says - a declaration, not a question.

Will still remembers what it was like, seeing the old man hurt her, feeling his satisfaction in the hurting and her pain simultaneously, feeling all of it on his own body. By the time he was six or seven he had worked out how to tell, almost as soon as his father started in on her, if he would be satisfied with that or if he'd lay in on Will, too.

Still, he shakes his head. "That's the story that you want to make out of it, because that would be easy for you to understand, but it's not the truth. I killed him because I was afraid of him and I didn't want to be afraid anymore.

"I felt really good for years after that. I guess a lot of it was just not being under his thumb anymore, but it was also just knowing for sure how much I was capable of, and that I could do it again if I needed to. Eventually, things started to fray around the edges, and I needed to do it again, so I did."

Will spreads his hands - story over.

He watches Hannibal trying to absorb what Will has given him. There is something endearing to the way Will can see him turning it all over in his mind carefully, working through what he's been told. He thinks that Hannibal understands nearly everything that he's said - more, certainly, than anyone else could - and that were Will to tell him more he would be met again with the same thoughtful desire to understand, even if Hannibal resists reaching the same conclusions that Will does.

This all could become addicting, he thinks, with the unease of a man who suspects that he's already hooked.

Chapter 12

Chapter by Pragnificent (PragmaticHominid)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal is still for a long time after Will stops talking. Will gives him time to digest what he's heard, wondering if he will be able to stomach it.

He thinks about what might happen, if Hannibal decides to turn him in. If forensics comes knocking with a warrant they'll find enough to put him away for the rest of his natural life, no question. That's true even if he takes out the special equipment in the basement - it doesn't matter how careful he's been or how good he is at covering his tracks; there's always something that will give you away, if they look closely enough to find it.

It wouldn't be the end of everything if Will has enough lead time to flee. He has false papers and he's got plenty of money, but he'd be forced to abandon his practice along with everything else; there are patients that won't do well if he leaves them in the lurch so suddenly, not to mention the affect that learning such uncomfortable truths about their psychiatrist might have on their mental health. His feelings towards his family home are ambivalent, but he'd lose the hounds - they might come to a bad end, too, if anyone cottoned to the sort of game he's taught them to run down. There's the household staff to think about, too.

The chances he's been taking are outrageously dangerous. He keeps looking for ways to convince himself that it isn't worth it, or else to justify the risk.

"Why is it that you think that you love me?" Will asks now.

Hannibal worries his lower lip between his teeth, and Will slides his eyes away from the sight, not wanting to deal with the way it makes him feel. Already, he regrets the question.

"Because what you do - what you were doing with me in our sessions, what we were doing together… it's what Stammets wanted, isn't it? He wanted to give me a means to connect, and he has, and I don't want to let it go now that I have it.

"Look at me, Will," Hannibal says, his tone becoming suddenly sharp, and Will feels compelled to do so - or at least to try. Will glances up at him from the corner of his eye, unable to raise his head to meet Hannibal's eyes directly. "Even when I felt sure that you were going to kill me, every time I saw you my first thought was how badly I didn't want to have to give you up.

"And because I see you now and I know that you see me. And I know that we will see each other better, the longer we work at it." Hannibal straightens, lifts his chin defiantly, and Will feels terribly small in the face of his confidence. "You're as alone as I am, Will. You need me too."

It’s an easy trick, to direct self-loathing outwards onto others as disdain, and one that Will has leaned on so often that he is barely conscious of doing so now.

“I really don’t,” he says.

Hannibal watches Will descend into anger like a man slipping down an icy slope.

It’s because Will thinks that he is being presumptuous, Hannibal knows. And because he’s frightened. He wonders if Will really believes that he’s somehow murdered his own fear along with his victims. Hannibal can smell it on him, and it’s so thick as to be nearly tactile.

“It’s true that you threw me through a loop, Hannibal, and I haven’t quite figured out what to do about it. But I’ve been busy this last week and I’m feeling much better now. Do you know what I’ve been up to?”

It’s a mistake to play along, probably. “You killed someone else,” Hannibal says. He is careful to keep his face still and to pitch his voice to sound bored.

Will’s smile is so soft that it borders on condescension. He holds up two fingers, pauses for the sake of dramatic timing, and then raises a third.

“Three someones,” he says, as though Hannibal might not have worked that out for himself. It's a deliberate provocation, and Hannibal is careful not to rise to the bait.

Will gestures at his battered face. “As it turns out, you did me a favor, marking me like this. I’m already such a harmless looking thing, but the cuts and bruises really sell a poor kicked puppy routine.

“You know, I told the last one that my boyfriend beat me up.”

It is nearly physically painful, the effort that it takes for Hannibal to keep his face still. He can’t control the sharp intake of breath, but in its wake he holds himself utterly motionless.

Will cocks his head to watch Hannibal. “That’s a formidable mask,” he admits. “Spine turns to steel, face to stone. I honestly can’t tell if you’re outraged or excited.

"That's what you want though, isn't it? To be my boyfriend?"

Hannibal feels the way his upper lip wants to curl, and he bites the inside of his cheek to try and stop it.

Will pauses, suddenly visibly uneasy. Hannibal thinks that he's realized that he's gone too far. He changes tracks quickly.

“I detest pity, don’t you? I can handle almost anything else, but pity is so stupid and wet and demeaning. And self-serving! He felt so *good* about feeling bad for poor little me that it took him a lot longer than it should have to catch onto the fact that he was in danger…”

Will spreads his hands - no need to finish that story. “It’s hard for them, you know. They struggle with the idea that someone who really seemed to understand them - who really seems to *see* who they are - can be the same person that’s hurting them. They expect empathy to go hand in hand with kindness, and when it doesn’t they have a lot of trouble understanding why. Some of them never really manage to wrap their heads around it.

“You’re a little slow on the uptake, but it's not too late for you to learn."

The last is an empty threat and Hannibal ignores it. He weighs instead the measure of guilt that he owes the dead, knowing that his complicity allowed for this; it’s his fault, not only that Will remained free to kill again but that he felt so personally compromised that he needed to do so many in such quick succession.

The next one will be on him too, and everyone after that.

He knows that it ought to weigh heavier on him, but it doesn’t.

“You’ve been flooding yourself,” Hannibal tells Will. “You’re exposing and re-exposing yourself to things that frighten you until you’re so desensitized that you hardly notice the fear. It’s been awhile since I took Psych 101, doctor, but I seem to remember that being viewed as a risky course of treatment.”

Will shakes his head. He is not threatened by Hannibal’s assertion; he knows that Hannibal is wrong.

“You keep saying that you see me, Hannibal, but you refuse to really understand what I’m telling you. But you could - if you let me show you, you could. Isn’t that what you’re really after?”

Hannibal is silent, but the tip of his tongue darts out to wet his lips, and that is as good as an answer.

“You worry so much about everything that you image yourself to lack,” Will says, and it is not the gentleness in his own voice that surprises Will so much as his realization of the sincerity of that gentleness. “Do you want to know what I see when I see you, Hannibal? I see endless potentialities, squandered and going to waste, all because you believe in the necessity of keeping yourself small.”

It’s dark outside when Hannibal leaves the office. The moon is bright above him, and its light reflects iridescently in the oily puddles as he crosses the parking lot towards his car.

Hannibal does not hurry. He is not fleeing from anything - neither Will nor himself.

He knows that he will be back again next week.

Chapter End Notes

This is the last chapter for this particular story, but there will be more fics set in this universe. I'm not sure exactly how the next story will shape out, but I am fairly certain that a road trip to Louisiana is involved.

I want to thank everyone who left kudos and especially who commented. You guys sustain me, you validate me and you drive me to work harder and to have a good time while I'm doing it.

Thanks. <3

Come visit me on tumblr, if you like.

Chapter 13

Chapter by Pragnificent (PragmaticHominid)

Just a heads up to subscribers - the sequel to this story is here.

Chapter 14

Chapter by Pragnificent (PragmaticHominid)

And now, here's some lovely art by my friend, Sparklyhero, whose other work can be viewed on tumblr here.

It goes with the second to last scene in Chapter Seven, and I am about to add it there, but I also wanted to post it as a new chapter so everyone would be aware that there's more content and so no one misses this wonderful illustration.

LET ME GO, WILL.
PLEASE.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!